

Anglo-Norman Developments of the Chanson de Geste¹

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This paper analyses the Anglo-Norman version of *Fierabras* (*Fierenbras*) in the light of characteristics of other insular texts written in chanson de geste form, namely the *Roman de Horn* and the Anglo-Norman *Boeve de Haumtone*. The analysis focuses on the economy of narration, a feature shared by all these texts, the way the *laisse* is used and the forms of discourse. It is observed that while *Fierenbras* exploits the potentials of the *laisse* in a fairly conventional way, following the continental text, it uses some forms of rhetoric that are more unusual in the continental tradition. Of most interest here is Charlemagne's prayer which is much more rhetorical and more tightly structured than in the continental *Fierabras*. This is in keeping with the mixture of chanson de geste and other forms of discourse in *Horn* and *Boeve de Haumtone*, arguably a feature of insular chansons de geste.

Dominica Legge in her seminal study of Anglo-Norman Literature claimed that "no trace of an Anglo-Norman chanson de geste survives" (Legge, *Anglo-Norman Literature*, p. 3). Yet two texts, written originally in Anglo-Norman rather than continental French, were written in chanson de geste form, namely, *Boeve de Haumtone* and the *Roman de Horn*. Some years later Keith Sinclair appealed for some Anglo-Norman texts, such as the different versions of the chanson de geste *Fierabras* that survive in Anglo-Norman manuscripts, no longer to be dismissed as "aberrant transcriptions of works produced in France" but as texts in their own right. "Perhaps it is time", he argued "on the evidence available to regard D [that is the lost Didot MS], and HF [the Hanover *Fierabras*] and EgF [the Egerton *Fierenbras*] as compositions that are products of the bilingual culture of England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries" ("*Fierabras* in Anglo-Norman", p. 377). The contradictory views of Legge and Sinclair are essentially the starting point for this paper which focuses on the version of *Fierabras* found in the British Library MS Egerton 3028; the title *Fierenbras*, the orthography used in the Egerton text, is used to distinguish this from the continental Vulgate *Fierabras*. A remaniement of the continental text, *Fierenbras*, as we shall see, shares characteristics of what we might call the Anglo-Norman chansons de geste, *Boeve* and *Horn*. The consideration that follows from this is whether any similarities between these texts justify considering them to be Anglo-Norman developments of the chanson de geste genre.

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There is no space here for me to argue in detail why I think *Boeve* and *Horn* should be considered chansons de geste; I have presented this in more detail elsewhere (Ailes, “*Boeve de Haumtone*”). Suffice it to say that I am treating the use of the *laisse* as the major generic marker (Suard, *La chanson de geste*, p. 9). Let us then consider briefly how the genre is developed in these two Anglo-Norman texts.

Economy of narration

The feature that is perhaps most obvious in these texts is their length. This may seem a rather superficial element—and given that the continental chansons de geste can range from a few thousand to some 20,000 lines it may not seem at first glance so significant. Two points are important here. The first is the date at which the Anglo-Norman texts were written: *Horn* is relatively early, around 1170 (Weiss, p. x); *Boeve* only survives in a thirteenth-century form (or rather several thirteenth-century forms, but we are concerned here only with the Anglo-Norman text)—a time when on the continent the chansons de geste were getting longer. The other significant point is that the narratives remain very detailed. Rather than simpler or just shorter narratives we have narratives that are more economically told.

The second feature is not just the use of the *laisse*—though we have noted that this is the major generic marker – but rather the way the *laisse* is used. Again the most obvious feature of the *laisse* is its length and, at a time when many chansons de geste have increasingly long *laises*, both *Horn* and *Boeve* exhibit a distinctive tendency to short *laises*. The average *laisse* length in *Boeve* is 18.8 lines and in *Horn* 21.4 lines. This is also indicative of a certain kind of *laisse* structure. In *Boeve* this is complex as we find *laises* which, like the *laises* of the *Chanson de Roland*, cover one incident, one piece of direct discourse, and others that have a change of focus mid-*laisse* (Ailes, “*Boeve de Haumtone*”). What is clear is that the *laisse* remains a meaningful unit of structure, limited in length and that usually has a clear *vers d’intonation* and *vers de conclusion*.

Finally, before we turn to *Fierabras*, we can consider the forms of discourse used in the two Anglo-Norman chansons de geste. Many of the features of chanson de geste discourse are of course linked to the use of the *laisse*. Our texts do not exploit the form in using what we may think of as characteristic techniques such as the *laises similaires* or *laises parallèles* but they do use other forms of *reprise*, formulaic repetition and what Heinemann has called “disjunctive echoes” (Heinemann, *L’art métrique*, pp. 237-81). What is rather peculiar to these texts however is the combination of such techniques as *reprise*, formulaic repetition, and apostrophizing the audience with what might be considered as more scholarly, clerical rhetoric, and poetic techniques such as enjambement and chiasmus, techniques less characteristic of the chanson de geste. Chiastic *reprise* is in fact something of a feature of *Boeve*. Rather than qualify this as a “hybrid” between epic and romance it seems better to consider it to be an insular development of the chanson de geste (Ailes, “*Boeve de Haumtone*”; Weiss, *The Birth of Romance*, p. xi). The texts are introduced as chansons de geste, we are invited to listen to them as such—but their forms of discourse are more varied than we might expect.

How far then does the Anglo-Norman *Fierenbras*, the text of Egerton 3028, fit the same pattern?

***Fierenbras*, the narrative**

Fierenbras survives with a postwritten prelude, the *Destruction de Rome*, found with *Fierabras* texts in two Anglo-Norman manuscripts, one being the Egerton 3028. To summarize briefly the connected stories of the *Destruction* and *Fierenbras*: the *Destruction* relates the tales of the sack of Rome and the stealing of certain relics of the passion; *Fierabras*/*Fierenbras* relates the tale of their recovery. The narrative begins with a single combat between Olivier and Fierabras after which Fierabras is converted but Oliver and Roland (and, in the continental Vulgate text, five peers) are taken prisoner. The remaining peers are sent to demand their release. They are, in turn, taken prisoner by Fierabras's father Balan. His daughter, Floripas, has fallen in love with Gui de Bourgogne. She releases the prisoners who then take over the castle but are in turn besieged inside it by the Saracens. Richard de Normendie is sent to bring Charlemagne to their rescue. The siege is relieved by the arrival of the French troops. Balan is killed; Fierabras and Floripas are baptised; Floripas and Gui marry; the relics are taken by Charlemagne back to Paris.

While the basics of this narrative remain substantially the same in the different versions of the legend, the Egerton text is nonetheless a thorough reworking—one which so reshapes the narrative that it is effectively a different poem, which Dominique Boutet has characterized as “entièrement recomposée” (Boutet, “Le *Fierabras*”, p. 283). Some of the narrative changes are made in order to harmonize the contents of the *Destruction de Rome* and *Fierabras*, but these are relatively minor. The most substantial alteration to the narrative is where in the continental “Vulgate text” Balan takes five of the peers prisoner and Charlemagne consequently sends the seven remaining peers to Balan demanding their release; in the AN text only Roland and Oliver are taken in the first instance and therefore, as we have seen, ten peers are sent to Balan as messengers. This alteration focuses the attention more on the two best known of the peers. Other alterations streamline the narrative. Thus when the peers are besieged in Balan's tower of Aigremore and wish to send Richard de Normendie as a messenger to inform Charlemagne of their plight, the various hindrances and adventures he encounters en route are all omitted. Overall the changes are sufficiently drastic to warrant treating the text as a new poem. Most important for our question is this streamlining of the narrative. The text contained in the Egerton manuscript is by some way the shortest of the *Fierabras* texts. The published text, based mostly on MS E (Escorial M. III-21), runs to some 6408 lines; the old Kroeber and Servois edition, based on MS A (BN f.fr. 12603) is slightly shorter at 6219 lines. The Egerton *Fierenbras* is a mere 1775 lines. (It is perhaps worth noting the shortest of the so-called “Vulgate” manuscripts is another text compiled for the Angevin court, the *Fierabras* contained in British Library MS Royal 15 E VI.) It is not just that the Egerton text is shorter than the texts contained in the continental manuscripts and shorter by a long way; it is interesting to note how this brevity is achieved.

Some of this abbreviation of the text is achieved by the omission of minor episodes. Elsewhere incidents are conflated. Thus, for example, in the Egerton text Richard de Normendie escapes with a message for Charlemagne during a sortie to rescue Gui who has been taken by the Saracens. In the continental text these are two separate incidents. Much of the increased momentum comes from decreased discussion and

description. When the rescue party of peers is on the way to Aigremore with a message for Balan, they encounter a party of Balan's messengers on their way to Charlemagne. The peers promptly kill the Saracen messengers without pausing to think that this is not good diplomacy. In the continental text they then debate the situation: should they go on or return to Charlemagne and tell him what they have done (ed. Le Person, ll. 2544-55)? In the Egerton text the debate is missing (ll. 772-73).

The other main way in which the narrative momentum is increased is by the omission of description. For example a detailed description of Floripas's room in the continental text is lacking in the Anglo-Norman one.

Fierenbras and the laisse

We noted that one feature of both *Horn* and *Boeve* is the relatively short laisses. Those in *Fierenbras* are rather longer at 33.5 lines to the laisse, but still significantly shorter than the average length of the laisse in the continental text, 38.1 lines. Being longer, the laisses of *Fierenbras* are also less tightly structured than in either *Horn* or *Boeve* though the laisse remains a unit of composition.

The continental *Fierabras* makes considerable use of the various forms of parallelism and *reprise* available to the *chanteurs de geste*. The *remanieur* treats these repetitions in a variety of ways. In an extended scene Charlemagne sends a number of messengers to the Saracen Balan, demanding the return of his imprisoned peers, Roland and Oliver, and of various relics stolen from Rome. The scene in the continental version has a series of parallel laisses in which seven peers are sent in turn to Balan with the message (ll. 2384-444). Roland is first nominated, then follow a series of laisses with Naimon, Basin, Tierri and Ogier each protesting about the other peers being sent on this dangerous mission, and each in turn being told to join the messengers. Finally Charlemagne adds Gui to the total. This is developed in the Anglo-Norman text where narrative changes mean that there are ten peers to be sent rather than seven; we have, therefore, an extended series of parallel laisses:²

Jeo men irai volunters dist Gy ladurez

Duc Neimes de Baver sest es piez levez

Cil se genule devant charl merci lad criez

Hay beau duce sire qe avez vous pensez

f96v

Jeo sai bien se il voise jamais ne le verres

Vous irrez od luy dit Charls por le corps des

Ogier li bon danois sest es piez dresciez

Devant Charls de France sest il enclinez

Haye beau douce sire car en pernez pitez

² The text given is a transcription of the manuscript (Egerton 3023); line references are from Brandin ("La Destruction de Rome et Fierabras").

De vos barons qe ci sunt *et* de tes privez
 Jeo sai bien se il vont jamais ne les *verrez*
 Vous irrez od els si porterez mes brefs

Terri lardoneis sest es piez dresciez
 Hai beau dusce sire kavez en pensez
 Volez *vous* destruire vos riches barnez
 Jeo sai bien se il vont jamais ne les *verrez*
 Vous irrez od els par Dieu de Majestez

Foukes li vaillant sest sus redresciez
 Charls le roi de *France* ad areisonez
 Sire roi dit il merci pur la pite Dez
 Si vos barons i vont cil serrunt afolez
 Vous irrez od els par mes *gernuns* mellez

Alloris li pruz sest en piez levez
 La ou Charls se sist si lad appelez
 Hay beau douce sire qvez en pensez
 Pur kei vols afole tes riches *parentez*
 Jao sai bien se il i vont tost serrunt afolez
 Vous irrez od els *par* lalme *mun* pers

Neiron li barbe sest sus redresciez
 Charls le roi de *France* ad areisonez
 Sire roi dist il malement es *porpensez*
 Si les barons i vont ne *pensez* del *retorners*
 Vous irrez od els par le corone *mun* chiefs

Genes qi tant fu pruz sest redresciez
 Li roi de *France* apelle si lad areisonez
 Hay beau duce sire reis merci por la pite des
 Si vos *contes* i vont jamais ne les *verres*
 Vous irrez od els *par* le pite des

Berard li prud *conte* sest es piece leves
 Charls le roi de *France* ad areisones
 Hay dreiturel sire merci *por* la pite des
 Vols tu tes barons mettre a viletes
 Qi *vous* aiderunt desormais quant averez mestiers
 Vous irrez od els par dieu de majestes

Danz Brier de nantes sest es piez levez
 La roi de *france* aresun *com* ja en orrez

Charls dreiturer sire merci *por* lamour des
 Jeo sai de veir se il vont jamais ne les *verres*
 Vous irrez od els par mes *gernuns* melles
 Vous serrez le disme qi porterunt mes brefs
 Et garde bien chescun ni seiez aloignes
 Ke *mun* message seit a Laban nuncies
 Sire font il volunters puis qe *vous* le voles

In other scenes that in the continental text exploit the potential for parallelism inherent in the use of *laisses*, the Anglo-Norman text does not retain the parallelism. Thus when the messengers arrive at Balan's court we are not, as in the continental text, given the speeches of each messenger in turn but only that of Naimon (ll. 780-96). This is probably because of the impulse to economy of narration in the Anglo-Norman text. Generally speaking the various instances of *reprise* found in the continental version are lacking in the Anglo-Norman which often runs together what would be several *laisses* in the continental text.

Forms of discourse

We have already noted the use of parallelism in *Fierenbras*, and implicit in that is the use of formulaic repetition, a feature of *chanson de geste* discourse with which we are all very familiar. A mere glance at the *laisses* quoted above shows that this section of the poem is, not surprisingly, very formulaic. In fact only 11 of the 53 lines do not contain a phrase that is repeated in substantially the same form within the text. This level of formulaic density is not, of course, found throughout the poem; however, the formulaic density of the poem is quite high throughout. A feature of the Anglo-Norman texts of *Horn* and *Boeve*—particularly the latter—is a combination of *chanson de geste* features with more scholastic rhetoric (see Kay). When we examine the use of rhetoric in *Fierenbras* we find mostly such devices as might be found in other *chansons de geste*, devices such as binomials, anaphora or alliteration, for example:

Anaphora

Adunc oisses .ii. mil gaelis sonner
 Adunc veisses paiens sur lur destrers *mun*tier (ll. 1621-22, f.115v)

Apres sen vont les uns as escheches juer
 Et les uns vont en le champ boorder
 Et les uns vont les peres ruer
 Et les uns vont beles dames dauncer (ll. 882-85, f.100v.)

Oliver choist Laban qui le quide afoier

Mais Laban sen hastea le chambre voit entrer
 Oliver le pursuye le chief li quide trenchier
 Mais Laban sen prent par un fenestre sailler
 Oliver saka le branc si le quida atteigner (ll. 936-40, f.101v)

Anaphora itself is not unusual in chansons de geste but is in fact rare—for anything other than the definite article—in the continental *Fierabras*. Interesting in our Anglo-Norman text is the way it is extended in lines 936-40, with alternating lines beginning with “Oliver” and “Mais Laban”—emphasizing the fact that this is a duel between the two as Olivier seeks to kill Laban—and this aim is also stressed by the repeated “quide”.

Alliteration is another device not common in the continental text. It is in some cases not easy to determine how deliberate alliteration is, but there are a few cases in our text that seem to be used to both stress a point and possibly also to emphasize the rhythm of a half line, for example:

Les clowes et la corone (l. 5)

Par isel dieu qi tas fait *et* fourmes (l. 240)

En le flank le ferri (l. 343)

crerai saint *cristientez* (l. 351)

En le plus *parfonde* pute le fesoit ruer (l. 520)

Et per le gref del plaie sen prist a pasmier (l. 527)

Binomials are of course very common in all Old French texts, and we also find a few cases of rather clichéd similes, again a feature of many Old French texts:

Cuntre Fierenbras vint *com* sengler arage (l. 337)

Ca nount plus power qe un chien tues (l. 348)

Cil se *contint* un jour *com* lion arage (l. 422)

A plus de .xl. sarr’ ad les testes coupe (l. 423)

Ausi li fuient Turks *com* lalowe lesperver (l. 424)

More rare in the *chanson de geste* are the few cases of more developed word-play, sometimes, perhaps incidentally, alliterative:

Donez moi le doun *quant vous* m'avez *grantez* (l. 115)

Od Oliver en ad un jousté jousté (l. 185)

Un ceinture ai *et* tost *vous* voil mou/monstrer
 Tile *vertu* ad qī le volt ceinter... (ll. 1062-63)

Floripas sen corut la coffre differmet
 La ceinture en porta a Rollant mustrer
 Danz Rollant le *prent* si le voit enceinter... (ll. 1066-68)

Chescun enceintra le ceinture dor mier (ll. 1066-71)

Perdu ai ma ceinture qe li leres out ceinte (l. 1109)

.iii. jours en sojourna (l. 1174)

Chiasmus is one of the more interesting devices in that it is rare in the *chanson de geste*, though used in *Boeve de Haumtone*. Of the two examples here the first is more complex in that the second hemistich of line 102 remains the second hemistich when “t” is echoed in line 107, but the notion of service is then carried forward into line 108, thus completing a chiastic reprise of line 101:

Un doun pur *mun* servise ore me seit *grantez*
 Par saint Dynis dist li roi bonement l'averez
 A plus tost *cum* nous serrons en *France* retornez
 Si *vous* durai del mien chastels *et* citez
 Kant Oliver l'entent si l'ad merciez
 Mais un doun *vous pri* ore me seit *grantez*
 Pur tote *mun* servise ne *quorge* altre louers (ll. 101-08)

The following example is however more typical of the *chanson de geste* in that the chiasmus is used to adapt formulae to fit a change in rhyme:

Danz Richard les partout **devant lempereour**
 Kant Charls les vist si fu en *grant* freour
 Danz Richard les amena **lempere devant** (ll. 1592-94)

The use of the scholastic forms of rhetoric remains rare in *Fierenbras*, compared with *Horn* or, in particular, *Boeve*. Perhaps most interesting is where some rhetoric is used to reinforce chanson de geste topoi. One of the features of the genre exploited in all versions of *Fierabras* is the epic credo or *prière du plus grant pæril*. This form of prayer is found in two places: first when Charlemagne prays for Oliver as he is fighting Fierabras, and secondly when Richard de Normendie, with a fast flowing river in front and a pagan horde behind him, swiftly prays for help. Neither of these is quite conventional in that in both the person praying is more concerned for someone else than for himself. Charlemagne is praying for Oliver and Richard is as concerned that he should be able to bring help to his peers, besieged in the castle of Aigremore, as he is for his own safety. It is the first prayer that is of most interest:

Devant lautier se genule umblement dieu *prier*
 Charls le roi de France s'est umblement encline
 Si ad *prier* devoutement comencie
 Hai dieux de parais qe *por* nus fustez nee
 De la gloriouse *virgine* qe Marie est nome
 Ces douces mamelles enlattastes al *virgine* honore
 Puis tei baillastes as jues *por* le *nostre* peche
 Cils ont od lur *verges* tun saint sank ataine
 Puis fustes en la croise halt pendu *et* penee
 Od .iii. clowes du fer al croise ferme tache
 Puis *vous* ferai Longins parmi li couste
 Sanc *et* ewe iissist de tun queor sacre
 Puis fustes en sepulcre mis *et* pose
 Al *terce* jour resuscitastes ceo fui verite
 Puis en jetastes de enferne Adam tun *prive*
 Et Eve *et* Abraham *et* David li sene
 Puis alastes au ciel en tun seint majeste
 Iloec jugerez le monde en tun seinte dreite
 Ansi *veraiement* beau sire com ceo fui *verite*
 Garisez huy Oliver qil ne seit *enconbre*
 Charles leve ses meins umblement a dieu *prie* (ll. 278-98)

The prayer is carefully structured, enclosed within the repeated phrase “umblement dieu prier” “umblement a dieu prie”. The main body of the prayer, recounting the Passion of Christ, is characterized by an anaphoric structure with alternating lines beginning with “puis”; less formulaic than some parts of the text there are nonetheless a few formulaic hemistiches. What it lacks is the conventional references to such Old Testament miracles as the protection of Daniel in the lions’ den, or Jonah in the belly of the whale. If we compare this to the continental text (ed. Le Person, l. 1214 ff) we find a similar concentration on the New Testament—though it does include a reference to Adam and Eve and the Fall:

Damledex, Sire Pere, qui en croiz fu[s] penes,
 En la sainte puchele concheus et formes
 Em Belleem beau sire, illuecques fus[t] nes
 Et em pouvres drapeaux mis et envollepés;
 Sore la seinte estoile en rendi granz clarets,
 Et li pastors des chans en lour cors firent sonnes.
 De ls vostre puissance fu li mons lumines;
 Mout em pesa Herodes et ses Juiex desves
 Touz les petis enfans en furent decoupees.
 Puis alastes par terre .XXX.II. ans passes
 Vos feistes Adam, biau Pere esperites
 Puis feistes Evaim, dont le mont est peoples.
 Em paradis biau Sire, lot donnastes osten;
 Touz les buens de laiens lor fu abandonnes
 Fors le fruit dum pommier [...]
 Si garris Olivier qu’il ne soit afoles,
 Et que mon droit issoit conquis et esprouves (ll. 1221-35, 1286-87)

Most importantly this lacks the rhetorical structure of the Anglo-Norman; only lines 1230-32 give any indication of the anaphora that will later be developed by the Anglo-Norman poet. Interestingly the *prière du plus grand péril* is one of the features of the chanson de geste used by the *Boeve* poet—where we also find no reference to the Old Testament stories commonly cited, a focus, instead, on the Passion of Christ and a rhetorical structure (*Boeve de Haumtone*, ll. 1242 ff.).

Conclusion

The Anglo-Norman *Fierenbras* text shows that the poet had some skill in different forms of rhetoric but was very much at ease with the formulaic structures of the chanson de geste retaining many of the features of the discourse of the original. This combination of chanson de geste discourse with forms of rhetoric more

often associated with other genres is found in a greater degree in those chansons de geste originally composed for an insular audience, namely *Boeve de Haumtone* and the *Roman de Horn*. *Fierenbras* shares with these other insular texts a focus on narrative. The story is economically told with considerable narrative momentum and little concern for the descriptive set pieces that we might expect in a chanson de geste. What we find no longer, in the words of Sarah Kay, “contrasts with the rhetorical usage of vernacular hagiography romance, lyric poetry and other genres” (Kay, “The Nature of Rhetoric”, p. 320). This produces something that is not really a hybrid but rather a particular development of the chanson de geste. This is particularly true of the treatment of the narrative—for, at a time when continental texts are getting longer, these Anglo-Norman poets are producing short, fast-paced narratives. The *laisse* too is shorter than in many later continental texts. The *remanieur*, or perhaps I should say rather poet, responsible for the Anglo-Norman *Fierenbras* produced a text in keeping with this insular development.

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